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E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: LUXEMBOURG CABINET AGREES TO SUPPORT THE MUSLIM RELIGION

¶1. Summary: On July 6, the Government of Luxembourg (GOL) approved a draft law officially supporting the Muslim community. The law, in the form of a "convention," will provide Islam with equal status with other "convention" religions and will provide GOL payment for the salaries and pensions for seven Muslim leaders. There are already five "convention" religious groups in Luxembourg receiving some 21 million Euros a year in subsidies. There seems to be a clear political consensus in favor of the convention and it is likely to be adopted in parliament within the next year or two. End summary.

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Separation of Church and State  
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¶2. On July 6, after nine years of negotiations, the cabinet of Government of Luxembourg (GOL) approved a draft law officially supporting the Muslim community. After the cabinet's approval of the draft law, Minister for Religious Affairs Francois Biltgen called a press conference on July 24 to provide details. Biltgen explained that the state recognized certain religions as "officially supported" religions. This status gives the state a say in religious administration and appointment of clergy. In exchange, the government pays certain operating costs and wages related to the practice of the religion. Biltgen described the arrangement as "benevolent and open neutrality" on the part of the state. Biltgen explained that a convention with a religious group was not in any way "official recognition" of a religious group since religious freedom was guaranteed by the Constitution. Indeed, any religion can be practiced in Luxembourg with or without a convention.

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The Muslim community in Luxembourg  
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¶3. During his July 24 press conference, Biltgen said the GOL had no precise statistics on the number of Muslims in the country because religious affiliations in Luxembourg were protected by law. He estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 Muslims live in Luxembourg, representing about two percent of the population. This would make Islam the second largest religion in Luxembourg after Roman Catholicism. Responding to a question by a reporter, Biltgen said 90 percent of the Muslims in Luxembourg were Sunnis. (Note: In 1998 and 1999, the war in the Balkans caused a mass influx of Muslim asylum seekers. The GOL estimates that 32 nationalities are represented among the Muslim community in Luxembourg; 65 percent are from the Balkans, mainly from Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro. According to the website of the Muslim community in Luxembourg ([www.islam.lu](http://www.islam.lu)), the number of Muslims who have acquired Luxembourg citizenship or who are born in Luxembourg is steadily increasing. End note.)

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How the convention works  
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¶4. In 1998, the Luxembourg parliament unanimously adopted a motion allowing the government to negotiate conventions with religious

groups represented in Luxembourg. In order to benefit from such a convention, religious "candidate" groups needed to meet the following criteria: a) the religion needed to be practiced worldwide; b) the religion needed to be recognized in at least one other EU member state; c) the religious community had to respect the country's public order; and d) the religion needed to be well established in Luxembourg and have a sufficiently large community. Since 1998, five conventions have been signed: with the Catholic Church (a convention with the Roman Catholic Church already existed), the Protestant church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, and the Jewish community. Luxembourg's Muslims applied for a convention in 1998, but approval of the convention was slowed due to the need of the Muslim community to organize.

15. During his press conference, Biltgen praised the Muslim Community for their efforts in meeting two of his major requests. The first was the creation of an assembly of the Muslim faith, called "shoura," which represented a single interlocutor for the Muslim community. Biltgen explained that the recognition of the various entities among the Muslim community was essential to avoid the risks of sectarianism. Although the convention was no guarantee for a successful integration, Biltgen said it could create "an Islam of Luxembourg, instead of an Islam in Luxembourg." The "shoura" committee is composed of eleven representatives from the four Islamic centers in Luxembourg: the Islamic Cultural Center of Luxembourg in Mamer; the Southern Islamic Worship association in Esch-Alzette; the Islamic Cultural Center of Wiltz; and the Islamic Worship and Cultural Center of Western Luxembourg in Obercorn. The second request was the statutory requirement to respect both the Luxembourg Constitution and public order. On this subject, Biltgen praised the moderate attitude of Luxembourg's Muslim community during the controversy caused by the publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper last year that some Muslims believed to be anti-Islamic.

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Convention benefits  
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16. Biltgen said the convention was "the expression of society's desire to extend its hand to the Muslim immigrants and to welcome them with respect and dignity." He announced the convention offered Islam the benefits of equal status with other religions in Luxembourg, the attribution of the legal status, and, above all, payment of salaries and pensions to seven clergymen: one mufti, monthly salary from 5,700 to 8,200 Euros; one Secretary General, monthly salary from 3,800 to 6,100 Euros; and five Imams, monthly salary from 3,000 to 5,500 Euros each. The four Imams will be in charge of the four Islamic Centers in Luxembourg, the remaining Imam will minister to Muslim asylum detainees and the Muslims in the Luxembourg army.

17. The convention recognizes the mufti as the "Chief of the Muslim Faith." The mufti is elected and nominated by the "shoura committee," although the official nomination must be approved by the Minister for Religious Affairs. The mufti is required to take an oath in the name of Allah and the Koran. He is required to promise obedience and faithfulness to the Grand Duke and to the government established by the Luxembourg Constitution. He is also required to abstain from any acts that would be a danger to the public order and to security in Luxembourg. Biltgen said the Convention would not provide any additional rights to the Muslim Community besides the financial payments for its leaders.

18. Biltgen said the implementation of the convention still required the drafting of internal regulations ("statutes") of the assembly of the Muslim community in Luxembourg. The convention cannot be adopted by parliament until the assembly of the Muslim Community submits its statutes to the GOL. These internal regulations must contain the selection criteria for the appointment of the Imams and the mufti and members of the "shoura committee." (Note: The official interlocutor of the Muslim community, Enrico Boaretto, confirmed to Post that the final draft of the internal regulations had been submitted to the various Muslim entities for a final vote. End note.)

¶9. The five "convention" religious groups will receive just over 21 million Euros in GOL subsidies in 2007 (a four percent increase from 2006). Twenty million Euros will be allocated to the Catholic Church with its 254 clergymen and 292 religious teachers and other technical-administrative staff. The Protestant Church receives financial payment for two clergy of the Protestant Reformed Church and for three clergy of the Protestant Church. Four posts are allocated to the Jewish Community and two posts for the Anglican Church. The Orthodox Churches from both Romania and Serbia receive financial payment for a total of four posts. All religious workers are employed under the "private employee status," which is harmonized with the salaries of Luxembourg civil servants. Besides salary payments, there are some "extraordinary" subsidies for running costs. In 2007, 50,000 Euros was allocated for the restoration of the Catholic presbytery and the same amount for the construction of a new Orthodox church.

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Approval by parliament  
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¶10. According Biltgen, there is consensus among political parties to adopt the convention in parliament within the next year or two. All political parties, except the Greens, have formally approved the need for a convention with the Muslim community, including the right-wing populist ADR (Action Committee for Democracy and Justice). The Greens (seven seats in Parliament out of sixty) are for a clear separation between state and church and oppose any government financial support for clerics. It remains unclear, however whether the Greens would actually vote against the convention. Only one Member of Parliament - Independent Aly Jaerling (formerly ADR) - is clearly opposed to the convention. Jaerling has insisted taxpayer money should not be spent on religious groups. Any discussions in parliament aside, Biltgen did suggest that there might be some potentially difficult public discussions about the draft convention in society more broadly. Opinion polls have indicated many Luxembourgers have negative views of Islam due to its perceived poor treatment of women and links to terrorist activities.

¶11. Comment: Despite Biltgen's concerns, post thinks that any public debate of the convention with the Muslim community will be muted. The draft law has been in the works for many years, and recent Muslim immigrants seem to have adapted to life in Luxembourg quite rapidly. Post maintains regular contact with senior leaders in the Muslim community and knows of no active anti-Islamic sentiment or activities in Luxembourg.

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